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HUNTERIANA

A Hunterian pupil

Sir William Blizard and The London Hospital

Rita R Auden FRCS

Senior Surgical Registrar, The London Hospital

> 'The pursuit of honours and riches is likewise very absorbing, especially if such objects be sought simply for their own sake, inasmuch as they are then supposed to constitute the highest good. In the case of fame the mind is still more absorbed, for fame is concerned as always good for its own sake, and as the ultimate end to which all actions are directed. Further, the attainment of riches and fame is not followed by repentance, but, the more we acquire, the greater is our delight, and, consequently, the more we are incited to increase both the one and the other; on the other hand, if our hopes happen to be frustrated we are plunged into the deepest sadness. Fame has the further drawback that it compels its votaries to order their lives according to the opinions of their fellow men, shunning what they usually shun and seeking what they usually seek. . . .
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> 'The acquisition of wealth, sensual pleasure or fame is only a hindrance, so long as they are sought as ends not as means; if they be sought as means they will be under restraint, and far from being hindrances, will further not a little the end for which they are sought'—Spinoza: 'On the improvement of the understanding' (in *Opera Posthuma,* 1677)

Fame in the fullest measure came to Sir William Blizard, but he never sought it as an end in itself. His life illustrates in an exemplary manner the value of the 'restraint' advocated by Spinoza. He was Founder and First President of the Hunterian Society, President of the Royal College of Surgeons of London (later to become the Royal College of Surgeons of England), a Fellow of the Royal Society, President of the Anatomical Society, Fellow of the Royal Societies of Edinburgh and Göttingen, Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London, Surgeon to their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester, and in 1803 he was knighted. In spite of all these honours the tributes of his friends stress his qualities as a philanthropist, gentleman, and seeker of truth.

> 'He contrived by various means to excite a degree of enthusiasm in the minds of his pupils. He displayed to us the *beau-ideal* of the medical character —I cannot readily tell you how splendid and brilliant he made it appear—and then he cautioned us never to tarnish its lustre by anything that wore even the semblance of dishonour. He caused the sentiment of the philanthropic Chremes of Terence to be inscribed on the walls of the Hospital Surgery, that students should have constantly before them an admonition to humanity drawn from a reflection of their own wants: HOMO SUM: HUMANI NIHIL A ME ALIENUM PUTO ["Nothing relating to humanity can fail to concern me since I too am human"]'—Sir John Abernethy.

Blizard was born at the village of Barnes Elms in Surrey in 1743. His early schooling was neglected so that he did not have the advantage of a classical education, but in later life, without assistance from others, he acquired a tolerable facility in reading Latin.

He was articled to a Mr Besley, surgeon and apothecary at Mortlake, and commenced his professional studies at The London Hospital under Mr H Thompson. About this time he attended the lectures of Pott at Bart's and the Hunters at St George's 'by whom he was much noticed' (William Cooke). At an early period of his life he was elected surgeon to the Magdalen Hospital, from which he resigned on the occasion of his appointment to The London Hospital (21st September 1780) on the death of Mr Thompson. Together with a Scottish physician, Dr Maclaurin (well known as a teacher of anatomy) he started lecturing at rooms in Thames Street and later in Mark Lane. In 1785, encouraged by his success, he persuaded the House Committee of The London Hospital to allow him to give two courses of lectures, one on anatomy and one on surgery. His request was granted (on one condition—that he should not use the hospital patients for demonstrations!) and he was provided with the use of rooms (built largely at his own expense) on the east side of the hospital for his lectures. This became the Medical School of The London Hospital. Such was his joy at the founding of the School that

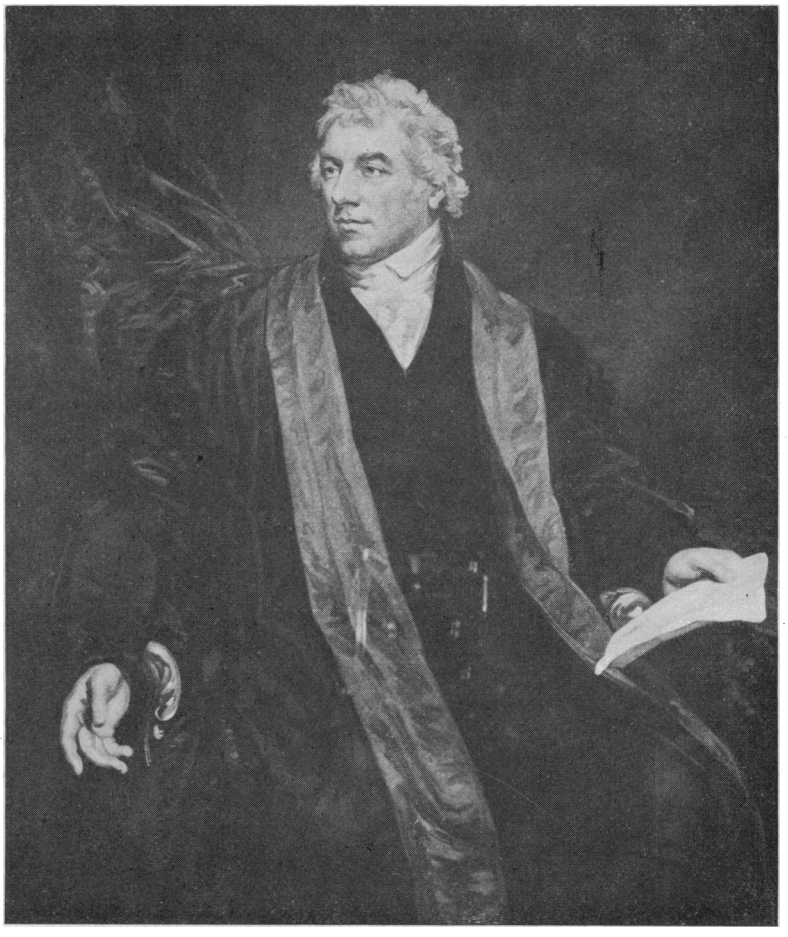

FIG. 1 *Sir William Blizard* FRS FRCS. *Engraving from a portrait by John Opie* RA.

he commemorated the occasion in verse, which was set to music by Dr Samuel Arnold and performed at the London Tavern!

'Hail the return of this auspicious day!
Now let the grateful, gen'rous heart record,
In heart-felt strains, how Providence befriends
This seat of commerce and benevolence!
In this fam'd city dwells such social love
As smiles alone in climes of liberty.
The genial patronage of every art,
That tends to soften the rough paths of life
Bids the wide dome with lofty columns rise
Fann'd with refreshing air, and ev'ry charm
Which the lax nerve and drooping frame can ask:
She, kinder still, bids industry prevail,
Without whose aid all other aids are vain:
Sacred to her be this auspicious day!'

AIR

'Britons ever fam'd for sense,
Famed for sweet benevolence,
With the genuine voice of praise
Noble emulation raise.'

These rooms continued to be used for teaching purposes until 1854, when the present Medical College was erected in the south-west corner of the hospital grounds. It is of interest that this was the first medical school connected with a great hospital. There were already a number of private medical schools—the most famous was the Hunters' in Great Windmill Street—but many others had sprung up in the metropolis. Many surgeons, too, gave lectures in their own houses. Risorière, for example, advertised his in the public press. But as yet there had been no organised medical school at a hospital. So to obtain a complete medical or surgical education a student had to attend one of these private schools and at the same time get taken on as a walking pupil at a hospital. Thus theoretical reading and clinical training were, in fact, divorced—in addition to which it involved a

considerable amount of travelling (a situation not completely without parallel today!).

Blizard, having suffered from this system, had for some time wanted to start a medical school actually at and associated with a hospital. The fact that he had been specifically debarred from demonstrating on hospital patients made it clear to him that his medical school must be rendered independent of hospital control by having its own building in which its sovereign right would be paramount.

Blizard was respected highly both as a teacher and a clinician, though he was probably happiest at the bedside. John Abernethy, one of his most grateful pupils, provides the following view of his ability as a lecturer:

> 'My warmest thanks are due to him for the interest he excited in my mind toward those studies and for the excellent advice he gave me to direct me in the attainment of knowledge. "Let your search after truth", he would say, "be eager and constant. Be wary of admitting propositions as facts before you have submitted them to the strictest examination. If, after this, you believe them to be true, never disregard or forget one of them. Should you perceive truths to be important, make them the motives of action, let them serve as springs to your conduct. Many persons acknowledge truth with apathy . . . they assent to it but it produces no further effect on their minds. Truths, however, are of importance in proportion as they admit inferences which ought to have an influence on our conduct, and if we neglect to draw those inferences or act in conformity to them we fail in essential duties".'

As a clinician, Cooke commented:

> 'Blizard was most happy and appeared to greatest advantage, in the wards of the hospital. His clinical remarks, and his oral instructions, were much valued and he took advantage of every opportunity to disseminate the improvements and principles of his great preceptors Pott and Hunter.
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> 'The aptness and vivacity of his remarks, and his ready tact in directing the attention of students to the leading points in the cases under his care, rendered his visits, at all times, instructive. Nor was he unmindful of that propriety of language which has its great advantages when cultivated by the aspirants to a learned profession. On one occasion when I had the pleasure of walking through the wards with him, he enquired of a student what was going on in the operating theatre. The young gentleman replied: "Mr Headington, Sir William, is operating on a case of strangulated hernia, but the gut is quite rotten". He pleasantly remarked, "Pray, Sir, do not call it gut, or say it is rotten, or you will be taken for a butcher; but call it intestine and say it is gangrenous". Perhaps this generation of surgeons is not quite so mindful of that propriety of language desirable in a "learned profession"!'

William Blizard did much in the way of administration for The London Hospital, inducing many of his most wealthy patients to become Life Governors or to make bequests for its maintenance, and he worked assiduously to impress its claims upon the public. One wonders how effective, by comparison, administration can be when taken out of the hands of clinicians.

He was greatly disturbed too by the pitiable conditions to which many of his patients returned after leaving the hospital. 'During several years he was in the habit of contributing extensively from his own pocket, to relieve the pressing necessities of patients who, on leaving the hospital in a lame and an incurable condition, penniless, homeless, and not infrequently without friends, were exposed to a wretchedness exceeding that of their condition before they were admitted'. This led him in 1791, with the co-operation of others whose interest he had enlisted, to found the Samaritan Society of The London Hospital 'for the relief of such distresses of patients of The London Hospital as are not within the provisions of this institution'. It was Blizard, too, who caused a bell to be hung at the hospital so that anyone requiring entrance at night might be able to attract the attention of the watcher.

In a short review it is not possible to list all his skills as a surgeon. Sir William MacCormac, in his *Souvenir of the Royal College of Surgeons,* described Blizard as one of those 'brilliant surgeons' who, with Astley Cooper, Clive, Home, and Lawrence, 'made England famous at the early part of the nineteenth century as the centre of surgical teaching and surgical progress'.

Probably his greatest surgical achievement was ligating the thyroid arteries in the treatment of goitre. He had learnt the value, under certain circumstances, of reducing the blood supply to an organ from John Hunter (the latter had obtained leave to tie the arteries on the antlers on one side of some of the stags in Richmond Park, showing that this retarded growth and illustrating one of the early examples

FIG. 2 *Blizard as an old man. 'If this be eve, how great the morn hath been!' (Reproduced by permission of the trustees of the British Museum.*

of an experiment designed with its own inbuilt 'control'). In a case of thyroid enlargement he tied the arteries to the gland and by the end of a week the gland was said to have been half its former size. The patient died of 'hospital gangrene'—one of the scourges of the pre-antiseptic days, but this operation was taken up by others in this country and remained the standard method of surgical attack on goitre until thyroidectomy was introduced half a century later. He was also one of the earliest surgeons (Liston probably being the first) to tie the subclavian artery for axillary aneurysm (aneurysms were common in those days owing to suppuration in wounds).

The last time he operated in public was in 1827, aged 84. 'It was the removal of a thigh, and the stump healed perfectly in a fortnight. As an operater he was remarkably cool and determined, never losing his presence of mind. He hand never trembled, and it is said to have been as steady the last year as at any period of his life' (William Cooke).

Sir William was the first President of the Hunterian Society and the first member to pay the admission fee! He was also the first Honorary Member and delivered the first Oration, and throughout his life remained 'one of the sincerest and best friends of the Society'.

In 1787 Blizard was appointed Professor of Anatomy to the old 'Corporation of Surgeons', being re-elected in 1788 and presented with a gold medal. He rendered great assistance in obtaining a charter for the new College. He and Sir Everard Home were the two first appointed professors to this chartered institution, now designated the Royal College of Surgeons of London (1800). In 1810 he became an examiner and remained one until his death. He secured the office of President twice and delivered the Hunterian Oration three times. In 1810 he gave the Arris and Gale Lecture and was Hunterian Lecturer and Hunterian Professor of Surgery. In 1814 he was Master of the Company of Surgeons and in 1822 President of the Royal College of Surgeons, giving his valedictory address on 10th October 1823. The Jacksonian Prize was founded in 1800, at his instance, by his friend and pupil Samuel Jackson. When he retired from the lectures at The London Hospital 'it became his great desire that the College of Surgeons (having had secured to it by government grant the "splendid" anatomical museum of the late John Hunter) should be a depository of facts in natural and morbid anatomy "worthy of the nation" and, believing that one vast collection under correct arrangement and freely accessible afforded pre-eminent advantages to the profession, he munificently presented to the College his entire collection of nearly 900 preparations' (many prepared and injected by himself). This collection remains one of the College's most magnificent historical possessions.

In spite of failing health in the last years of his life (in 1834 he had the lens of his right eye removed for cataract and shortly afterwards developed symptoms of congestive cardiac failure) he remained active to the end. He attended the Court of Examiners at the College a week before his death in 1835—and even the day before his death he dictated a letter to the President of the College, accounting for his absence at the Court the following night! He was interred in a vault beneath

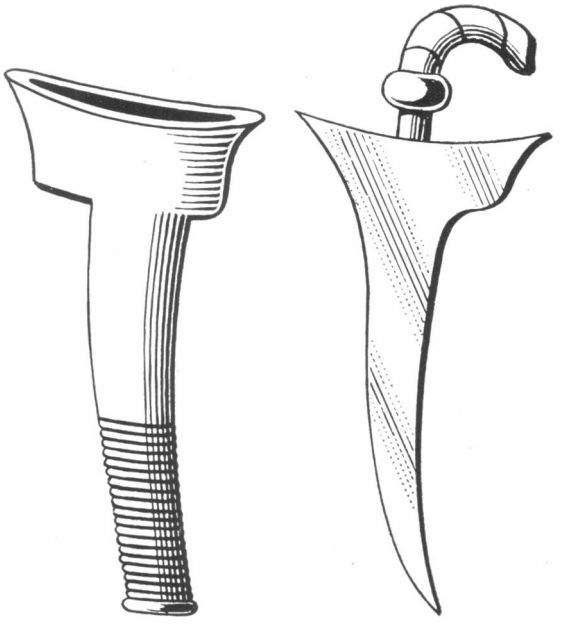

FIG. 3 *'Blizard's hanger' a kind of broad-sword which Blizard carried in his coach for self-defence. (Reproduced by permission from the* London Hospital Gazette.)

St Matthew's church, Brixton, on 4th September (he had lived at Brixton Hill for 13 years).

Throughout his life Blizard was a prolific writer of prose and poetry—in his early years he was a great agitator for political reform and liberty—writing under the pseudonym 'Curtius' (for example, 'On the Intent and End of Government' in which he stresses that the 'higher classes should set an example to the lower' and 'Desultory Reflections on Police with an Essay on the Means of Preventing Crimes and Amending Criminals' (1785)).

Perhaps a final example of how little times have changed is illustrated by a humorous anecdote described by Cooke.

> 'At the period which has been alluded to when it was dangerous to travel in the vicinity of London, by night, unarmed, Sir William was accustomed to carry some weapon with him, which habit he continued till the period of his death. One night, on leaving the Court of Examiners at the College, he missed his favourite weapon—a hanger (Fig. 3) —which had more than once served him as a weapon of defence in early life. His servant was unable to give any account of it, which induced Sir William to exclaim, with some energy, "It must be found, for with it I am in fear of no one, not even the devil himself". A member of the Court who was by, shrewdly remarked, "If that is the case, he had better have it put into his coffin with him".'

In an age when science teaches us to speak no longer of absolute truths but, instead, of 'degrees of probability' and when philanthropy is inevitably limited by the resources of the individual Sir William Blizard particularly deserves to be remembered. The motto which he gave to the London Hospital Medical College:

HOMO SUM: HUMANI NIHIL A ME ALIENUM PUTO

(translated freely in the 18th century by George Coleman as 'I am a man and feel for all mankind') was not just a convenient epigram but an expression of the ideals by which he actually lived and practised his art of surgery.

Photographs of the illustrations were kindly loaned to me by Mr Ruddick of The London Hospital.

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